

Peter Denman

LOCAL HABITATIONS AND NAMES

Pat Boran, *New and Selected Poems* (Salt, 2005), £11.99.

Joseph Woods, *Bearings* (Worple Press, 2005), £8.

Thomas McCarthy, *Merchant Prince* (Anvil Press Poetry, 2005), £11.95.

Three books here from Irish poets, each of them with a different English publisher but with a clear sense of an Irish locale. Pat Boran's *New and Selected Poems* contains a generous selection of poems from five previous collections published over the past decade and a half, and eleven new poems. It allows us an overview of a voice that has become a steady presence in Irish writing, at once playful and unshowy. His early poems are observational and descriptive. Many of them are carried by the characters, named or unnamed, on whom they focus: Casey, the foreman on a London building site, Martin Drennan from Ballydavis, a drummer in an Irish country and western band, an American juggler on Grafton Street. Sometimes these characters are celebrated for their personality, especially if they have a trace of quirkiness about them. On other occasions, the characters are seen more as figures to be studied from the outside, and any attendant quirkiness stems from the poetic angle Boran brings to bear on them. The juggler surrounded by balls, for instance, modulates into Bohr's model of atomic structure, and prompts an allusion to opportunity in the school laboratory. Many of these poems also step back to the early days of Boran's youth in Portlaoise. The towns and territory of central Ireland form a backdrop as he uncovers the concerns and preoccupations that move behind windows on the main street or in the fields around. There has been a great deal of topographical emphasis in modern Irish poetry, some of it enlarging and effective, some of it trite. Many poems treat the landscape as a historical or mythical sounding board, drawing on it to add resonance to lives as described. What distinguishes Boran's poetry is that he avoids this tendency, and instead finds the material adequate in itself while at the same time achieving an individuality of voice that rises above the trite.

The later poems complicate. One of the early pieces is entitled 'Alternative Histories', and in many respects his more recent poems in this book offer alternative histories to those given in the earlier collections. It is not a case of revisionism so much as of opening up events and characters to the possibilities of a flighty imagination. For instance, there is a poem called 'Lower Main Street' from the 1990 collection *History and Promise*. The locus is revisited in poems in a later sequence collected six

years later, where a poem recalls a moment on the street in childhood, and another touches on it in the present. As a child the poet had illuminated his cheeks by placing a flashlamp in his mouth, and then attempts to speak; it becomes an image for the poetic endeavour of

. . . humans like me with flames in their mouths,
fire in their hearts and they burning to tell
the wonder of it, the loneliness of it.

The second poem imagines a child hanging on a butcher's hook outside the shop on the main street. Instead making the image primarily grotesque, Boran manages to suggest that the hook is the clutch of a remembered past. As he says of himself, at the start of 'Credo',

I believe in a moment where things
come into themselves and everything
before and after is a kind of fading.

At first sight it looks as if the poems in Joseph Woods's *Bearings* are also going to concentrate on the same territory as Boran's. The first in the collection is 'Surveying the Midlands'; later there is a charmingly laid-back short piece called 'Tyrekicking', which conjures up a place

somewhere east
of Drumshambo, where the small talk
is of angle-grinders, carburettor-crankshafts
and bent axles. . .

But his sense of the local setting is mixed with keen awareness of a world elsewhere, and his range opens out to take in encounters in Russia, China, India. At their lightest these may be little more than postcard poems, offering a momentary evocation, in 'Jasmine Tea' for example, of 'Chinese New Year in Chengdu, / grim if you weren't local', but others, like 'The Far Side', carry real imaginative weight.

The centre-piece of this collection is a group of poems called 'Ballyowen', about the last months of a family's occupancy of a large country house. This might have been just another contribution to the crowded set line of 'Big House' writings in Ireland, but these poems are distinguished by a sense of real involvement with the impending transition. The poems allude to the sonnet form: the sequence comprises fourteen fourteen-line poems, but unrhymed and deploying varying line lengths and line-groupings. As the poet observes the owners make preparations for leaving, recollections of his own visits to the house take

shape, as in 'Dreaming of Cill Chais': '... a door ajar / on the dining room left ancestral portraits whispering.' This sets in play an interaction between the preserved history embodied in the fabric of the house over several centuries, the owners' generational past that they have grown into and must now exchange for a relocated future, and the more recent presence of the poet as visitor being welcomed into the family. It allows for a rich background where 'Echoes return to wither every room.'

A sense of past and place also dominates Thomas McCarthy's *Merchant Prince*, a book which crosses genres. At its centre is an historical novella, in which the narrator Nathaniel Murphy, the Cork merchant prince of the title now in his seventies, recalls some youthful years spent in a seminary at Rome towards the end of the Eighteenth century. Before and after this are poems which offer glimpses of Murphy's subsequent life as a married man in and around the port of Cork, building up the family firm. The three sections are headed 'Blood', 'Memory' and 'Trade' respectively. The book is in part a celebration of Cork's past. It also attempts to take poetry into the domain of the novel, by attempting a sustained exploration of character, and looking at the psychological reaction to various events and situations. The historical novel is a recognised genre; McCarthy also strives towards a form of 'historical lyric'. The cumulative effect is an ambitious and substantive book. Nathaniel Murphy evokes a specific strand of Cork history, and the focus on a figure who has moved between Ireland and Italy, with a life that spans the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries, and has lived both the erotic adventures of a young man and the emotional commitment of a happy marriage, opens up a scope of which McCarthy makes full use.

Spoilt from companionship with Art,
I have tasted too much of what is not the Church.

I cannot get her face out of my heart; her olive
Skin so like the eternal promise of painting.

— 'HE REMEMBERS THE VAL DI COMINO, 1770'

The novella 'Memory', begins with the statement: 'It is poetry that constitutes our deepest memoir', and the 100-page narrative of the years in Rome is an introduction into a life of sensuality and imagination. Among other adventures and episodes, the young seminarian has an encounter with a beautiful older woman, associates with artists – in particular with James Barry, the Cork painter resident in Rome – and becomes familiar with the work of leading 'Italian' poets. The Italian poets are in fact disguised versions of Liam Ó Muirthile, Nuala Ní

Dhomhnaill, Louis de Paor and Cathal Ó Searcaigh (who appear as di Murthillo, Nigonelli, etc). Readers are deprived of the game of identifying them by a note in the acknowledgements, but there remains the subsidiary puzzle of why choose Ó Searcaigh for this Cork *jeu d'esprit*?; it is easy to think of an additional Cork poet or two who might be grouped naturally with the others. And at times the novella as a whole seemed to be historical transposition of John Montague's *The Lost Notebook*.

The poems are given an antique cast by their their third-person titles: 'He Writes to his Estranged Sister, 1803', 'He Loses a Silver Buckle, 1797'. This formula is followed for practically all the sixty-six poems that bracket the memoir. It is slightly anachronistic, as (without the date) it is a form of titling associated more with the Sixteenth-century anthologies of poetry such as *Tottel's Miscellany*, and was revived briefly by Yeats and Hardy for some of their poems around 1900. It raises questions about the relationship of the poem to the persona at its centre: is there an editor who has affixed each title, or is the poet attempting to place a distance between the emotional complex at the centre of the poem and the form of words evoking it? It is apparent that one function of the date element here is to emphasise that the poems are not in chronological order of the events on which they are based, and so depart from the sequential structure of the prose narrative.

One difficulty with a work of this nature, in which poetic insight is interleaved with research, is the foregrounding of historical background. It is all too clear that Thomas McCarthy has absorbed a great amount of the social and cultural history of the period – the geography and commerce of Cork two centuries ago, the artistic climate of Rome around 1770. Having done the research and amassed the detail, there follows a compulsion to use it, with the result that at times the text becomes over-freighted with names and incident. It is almost a relief to find the occasional lightweight poem, relatively free of proper names and period detail, as in 'He Considers His Wife's Three Cats, 1793':

Only some un-Christian force, primeval nation,
Could feed upon the certainty of human loves.
Cats upon cushions; envoys whose only purpose is
To stretch, to yawn in sequence, to be luxurious.

But not the least impressive aspect of McCarthy's achievement, along with his management of the broad historical sweep of the work, is his marshalling of the details. This is a new type of poetry. In revisiting Cork's past, the poems are at once creative and exploratory.